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ABSTRACT

A discussion session for urban school superintendents from Pennsylvania and New Jersey identified four educational issues, currently the focus of a good deal of political debate and activity, that illustrate the shift from local to Federal, and then from Federal to state-level influence and initiative. These are (1) centralization of control; (2) educational adequacy; (3) financial equity; and (4) staff certification, supervision, and salary. Superintendents from New Jersey and Pennsylvania acknowledged that they must increase their influence over local- and state-level policies because there was little they could do about national issues. Because the superintendents had previously concluded that the Pennsylvania League of Urban Schools (PLUS) was more effective at influencing state and local policy than its New Jersey counterpart, much discussion centered on how New Jersey might adapt PLUS tactics. The association of urban superintendents in Pennsylvania enjoys a large budget and the services of a paid director--attributes that enhance the effectiveness of the association. The development of coalitions and information systems was seen as a way to improve the effectiveness of superintendents' efforts in both states. (Contains 31 references.) (SLD)

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THE URBAN SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENTS
OF
NEW JERSEY

POSITION PAPER #4

INFLUENCING LEGISLATION, POLICY, AND FUNDING TO BENEFIT URBAN SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

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INFLUENCING LEGISLATION, POLICY AND FUNDING TO BENEFIT URBAN SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

Introduction

Education and politics are inextricably linked. Laws, regulations, and policies that guide and control the educational process are continually scrutinized in federal, state, and local political arenas. As a result, they are in a constant state of revision, more often than not, in response to political pressures at one, or perhaps all three of these governmental levels. Today, state level politics and policy provide the major educational influences in America. This is a shift from a decade or so ago when federal influence was at its height; it is also different from twenty or thirty years ago when educational policy and practice were determined at the local level. Four educational issues, currently the focus of a good deal of political debate and activity, illustrate this shift from local to federal, and then from federal to state level influence and initiative. They are:

- o Centralization of control;
- o Educational adequacy;
- o Financial equity; and
- o Staff certification, supervision, and salary.

Centralization of Control

Once, nearly all questions about what schools should teach, to whom, and in what ways, were answered by the local community. State education agencies only set attendance requirements; federal agencies played virtually no role at all. This situation began to change in the late 1950s' with the launching of Sputnik. By the early 1960s, what was

perceived to be a widening gap between the achievements of the American and Iron Curtain educational systems prompted the federal government to intervene in local schools.

The first federally-funded curriculum initiatives in science and mathematics began a trend of expanded federal influence in local education that continued until it was reversed by the current administration. This influence sometimes took the form of direct intervention via mandates or laws, as was the case with desegregation and Public Law 94-142. More often however, federal influence was subtler, appearing for example, as recommendations in federally-sponsored reports such as A Nation at Risk or linked to fiscal considerations, as was the case with Title IX.

State education agencies have always had a potentially influential role because of their legal responsibility for educating the citizenry. Yet their influence has become significant only in the past ten years when many federal educational interventions and functions were shifted to the states. As with federal influence, state influence over local educational policies has been both direct and indirect. Graduation requirements in New Jersey and Pennsylvania are examples of direct state influence, Pennsylvania's "Agenda for Excellence" and New Jersey's "Urban Initiative" represent somewhat subtler and indirect influences.

In these two states the centralization of control is such a pervasive issue that it plays a role in virtually every other policy consideration. Its effects run the gamut from merely increasing district paperwork to constraining the implementation of effective educational programs.

Not surprisingly then, local educational agencies in these two states have lost much of their influence in these areas. Continuing a trend begun

in the 1960s, local districts -- particularly urban ones -- have become increasingly reliant on state funds and often have had little choice but to give up some of their policy-making perogatives to state or federal policy makers in return for continued fiscal support. This, in turn, has made local educational leaders even more reliant on state legislators and administrators not only for money but also for policies that tell them how to define and deliver an adequate education.

Educational Adequacy

The issue of educational adequacy covers a lot of ground; it includes questions of curriculum content and requirements, equity, equal treatment, desegregation, testing and promotion, length of school year and day, and so forth. Historically these questions, with the exception of attendance regulations, were the provence of the local community. More recently, however, questions of educational adequacy have become state and federal concerns.

At the federal level, the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, A Nation at Risk, has set the stage. It outlines both the thrust of the federal government's concern and the direction its policies will take for insuring educational adequacy. This, and several other similar reports calling for major, widespread educational changes, have become the federal governments' policy cornerstones.

Almost simultaneously with this upsurge of interest in educational adequacy, the federal government has reduced its direct financial aid to education in favor of funneling funds to states for distribution according to state priorities (within some boundaries, of course).

Anxious to respond to the reform reports, and under pressure to improve the quality of education, state level policy makers have capitalized on federal educational policy trends and resource allocations to increase their own influence over educational adequacy. State legislatures, using newly obtained federal funds as both carrot and stick, have begun instituting statewide graduation and promotion requirements, curriculum standards, testing programs, and the like. In addition, because of reduced federal activity in the area of equal treatment, state educational agencies have become more vigorous in areas such as desegregation, equity, and affirmative action.

Both New Jersey and Pennsylvania have followed some of these national trends by mandating graduation and promotion requirements. Both states use statewide achievement tests to measure student learning and employ mechanisms for monitoring student performance and school district effectiveness. In both states the regulations, monitoring processes, and assessment strategies are the consequences of agressive efforts by state courts, legislatures, boards of education, and departments of education to improve education statewide. This has diminished local influence and power in dealing with these issues.

In New Jersey, for example, the rules, regulations, and processes of the Thorough and Efficient (T and E) law (New Jersey Administrative Code Title 6, Substatute B, Chapter 8) have to a great degree defined adequate public education for school districts. Now the recently developed statewide Urban Initiative defines educational adequacy even further for New Jersey's urban districts by naming nine critical issues and five specific objectives for these districts' attention.

In Pennsylvania, Chapter 5 (Administrative Code 1317-1320) details state policies regarding educational adequacy. This law describes

curriculum standards and graduation requirements for all students in the state. It is supported by two statewide testing and monitoring processes, Educational Quality Assessment (EQA) and Testing for Essential Learning and Literacy Skills (TELLS). The governor of Pennsylvania has adequacy by providing all school districts with a statewide educational "agenda for excellence".

Financial Equity

Financial equity is achieved when the fiscal program is fair to students, taxpayers, teachers, and school districts. This issue is analagous to adequacy, but from a financial point of view. It is related to many of the same questions: declining enrollments, program and service quality, balanced budgets, and improved school equity.

As noted earlier, federal fiscal support for education is diminishing -- except in some areas of special interest. Also as noted, money once delivered directly to local agencies through federal programs has, to a large extent, been given to state agencies for disbursal. This trend, coupled with the fact that in both states fiscal responsibility for education rests with the governor and legislature, has produced an increase of state control over financial equity policies.

State governments for their part, have tended to disperse money to local school districts broadly and in somewhat equal sums. Often, however, their financial assistance is tied to fiscal and educational accountability as defined by statewide rules and regulations and students' performance on state tests. There seems to be a predilection among state educational policy-makers to mandate programs aimed at educational adequacy while

simultaneously setting limits on annual budget increases. It appears that the intentions of these state policies are to equalize educational costs among taxpayers, hold educators accountable for financial as well as educational decisions, and motivate school districts to comply with state educational priorities.

There have been efforts in both New Jersey and Pennsylvania to make educational spending formulas more equitable. Other efforts have tried to link state funding to local performance scores. In Pennsylvania, efforts to influence financial equity have been subtle, but nonethless effective. For example, through the regulations and processes associated with Chapter 5, EQA, and TELLS, state level policy-makers have affected school districts' educational goals and objectives. This, in turn, influences district educational priorities and programs; and through this, increases in district spending. The governor's "agenda for excellence" in education is sure to influence financial equity in Pennsylvania's school districts in a like manner. It is noteworthy that these efforts to equalize spending are not accompanied by parallel efforts to achieve tax equity.

The situation is less subtle in New Jersey because the T and E law, although designed to achieve financial equity, seems to be having quite the opposite results. The law has increased state support for education; yet it appears that the administration of T and E coupled with only partial funding by the state, has deferred rather than enhanced fiscal equity. There is a court case pending which argues just this.

These state-level trends on local educators is demonstrated by the following conditions:

- o local decision-makers and administrators have become responsive to state policies, regulations,

and guidelines rather than active in developing their own;

- local financial planning has become responsive to state priorities;
- different local constituencies have become increasingly competitive for scarce resources;
- local fiscal flexibility has diminished as state monies become increasingly targeted; and
- school districts with low per pupil costs have experienced bonanzas under new funding allocations whereas districts with high per pupil costs have experienced austerity.

Staff Certification, Supervision, and Salary

The federal government has virtually no policies regarding educational staffing, although it has encouraged states to adopt the recommendations of the various reform reports. Most states do have policies for screening and attracting staff but offer only broad guidelines for supervising them -- or for that matter, removing them. States also have policies governing collective bargaining. These policies are typically part of labor-management regulations and often are modeled on federal regulations.

In the area of recruitment and certification, state policies generally reflect federal concern about upgrading teacher quality. Most states have taken regulatory approaches that include--among other things-- mandated entry requirements, teacher competency tests, prescribed preservice programs, and similar controls. There have been some statewide efforts to institute master teacher plans and differential or merit pay systems, but too few states have adopted such policies to describe them as trends.

Both Pennsylvania and New Jersey have state level activities and initiatives aimed at staff certification and evaluation. There are also movements in both states to alter certification requirements, supervision processes, and criteria for staff accountability. In New Jersey, however, some of the state's influence on policies affecting staff certification and supervision are diminishing. Although the state agency remains responsible for certification requirements and procedures, a new procedure eliminates state review of transcripts and introduces an alternative route to certification. This alternative gives local districts more responsibility for decisions having to do with certification and staff selection. Presumably, this responsiblity is to be coupled with traditional local responsibilities for staff supervision and salary policies.

In a general way, state influence over certification is manifest in Pennsylvania in the same way that it is in most other states: the state sets certification requirements, approves certification programs, and controls the certification process. Recently, however, in response to the policies outlined in the governor's "agenda for excellence," there has been a state effort to influence staff supervision and evaluation by training local administrators. This activity is just beginning, so the scope of its impact remains to be seen.

Labor negotiations are a major local concern in both states. In the majority of districts, bargaining focuses on salary, but recent trends seem to indicate that staff working conditions, benefits, job-security, and teacher participation in policy decisions have become important considerations. The question of which items should be considered negotiable or set by contract is still a critical issue as well.

Discussion and Recommendations: Influencing Policy and Funding in Pennsylvania and New Jersey

The departure point for the urban superintendents' discussion was an acknowledgement that they must increase their influence over local and state level policies since there was little they could do about national ones. Prior to the discussion session, New Jersey superintendents had concluded that the Pennsylvania League of Urban Schools (PLUS) was more successful at influencing state and local policy than its New Jersey counterpart. Consequently, discussion centered on how the New Jersey association might adapt PLUS tactics. Discussants agreed that legislators and policy-makers in both states need more information to alert them to the problems and needs of urban schools. The following points made by New Jersey discussants illustrate this point:

- In New Jersey, each legislator represents a fairly large region and many regions do not include urban areas. Those that do are still largely suburban -- and legislators are likely to be more responsive to suburbia because they think that is where the votes are. For example, one urban district is in a legislative region that includes 19 other non-urban districts; legislators listen more closely to those 19 because of their voting power.

- It is the perception of many superintendents that even some urban legislators may be relatively unconcerned about public schools because a large percentage of the voters send their children to non-public schools.

- Even though nearly 40% of New Jersey's students are in urban districts, only 56 out of 611 school districts in the state are considered urban. When policies are developed for all districts in the state, they may not be good policies for urban districts and urban students.

The discussion and recommendations focused on three areas: the associations themselves, the development of coalitions, and the creation of information systems.

The Associations

The major differences between the New Jersey and Pennsylvania urban superintendents' associations are the latter's substantial operating budget (approximately $50,000 a year) and its paid director who coordinates priorities and activities. New Jersey superintendents agreed that their association's effectiveness and clout would increase if they had a larger budget and used it to hire a director who would coordinate their activities. This person also might serve as a lobbyist to enhance their association's credibility among legislators and, in turn, increase its effectiveness. This supposition was supported by the experiences of PLUS and the School District of Philadelphia. In sum, New Jersey superintendents recommended that, using PLUS as an operational model, their association give serious consideration to:

- o becoming more actively involved in lobbying;
- o increasing dues to increase its annual budget;
- o using some of this money to hire a staff person to monitor legislation, collect and disseminate legislative information, coordinate lobbying efforts, and actually lobby for the association;
- o recruiting the superintendents of Camden, Trenton, and Newark more aggressively to get the input, expertise, support, and influence that these cities carry; and
- o limiting membership in the association to those willing to pay higher dues and become active politically as well as socially.

Coalitions

All of the discussants acknowledged the importance of coalitions and several discussants underscored their potential impact through coalition "success stories." Superintendents generally agreed that coalitions represent not only a way to augment their influence, but also a way to enhance their credibility and increase their resources. Some, however, cautioned against letting coalitions get out of hand, suggesting that coalitions be limited and tightly linked to the urban superintendents' priorities.

The following recommendations were made:

- A survey of potential groups that could be included in coalitions should be conducted.
- A focused effort be made to participate in forums addressing urban concerns (such as the one sponsored by the New Jersey Education Association) and to use these forums to inform others of pressing urban school issues.
- Coalitions with non-public schools, labor groups, and school boards should be investigated.
- A program of issues and priorities relevant to urban superintendents' concerns should be developed before forming any coalitions; this program should guide the formation of coalitions.

Information Systems

Although information was not mentioned at the beginning of the discussion, it became important when superintendents realized that it is a fundamental building block of any lobbying effort. Once superintendents accepted information as a legitimate theme, they agreed that it is essential to the formation of effective coalitions as well.

Superintendents' need for information took two forms. First, there was a need for the associations to collect and disseminate information among their members. Otherwise, they run the risk of acting in ignorance or -- worse still -- acting at cross purposes. Information about issues, legislative trends, even the points of view of specific legislators is essential if the association is to act credibly and effectively.

The second need in the area of information was to provide it to others in the state. Legislators, other associations, and the public at large must be better informed about the realities of urban schools. They also need to know more about the issues that are critical to urban school success and the urban superintendents' positions on these issues. In short, there is a need for a campaign of public information.

Specifically, the superintendents recommend that:

- Information collection and dissemination become a major focus of their associations.
- A person be designated (or hired) to take care of information collection and dissemination tasks.
- The associations undertake a continuing program of public information aimed at eventually influencing legislators to act more equitably toward urban districts.
- A set of basic statistical information be developed, including costs, funds, and the impact of the two on education in urban districts. This data should be collected in a "state of urban schools" report.

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